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## Truth and Deception in the Human Mind

The human mind is a marvelous set of structures and systems. It is a center of consciousness and action. It forms a unique identity. It creates a view of the world. Rich experience emerges from its interactions with the world. It thinks. It feels. It wants. It apprehends truths and suppresses errors. It achieves insights and fabricates prejudices. Both useful truths and harmful misconceptions are its intermixed products. It can as easily believe what is false as what is true.

It can see beauty in right conduct and justify what is flagrantly unethical. It can love and hate. It can be kind and cruel. It can advance knowledge or error. It can be intellectually humble or intellectually arrogant. It can be empathic or narrow-minded. It can be open or closed. It can achieve a permanent state of expanding knowledge or a deadening state of narrowing ignorance. It both transcends the creatures of lesser ability and insults their innocence and nobility by its self-deception and cruelty.

How can humans create within their own minds such an inconsistent amalgam of the rational and the irrational? The answer is self-deception. In fact, perhaps the most accurate and useful definition of humans is that of "the self-deceiving animal." Deception, duplicity, sophistry, delusion, and hypocrisy are foundational products of human nature in its "natural," untutored state. Rather than reducing these tendencies, most schooling and social influences redirect them, rendering them more sophisticated, more artful, and more obscure.

To exacerbate this problem, not only are humans instinctively self-deceptive, they are naturally sociocentric as well. Every culture and society sees itself as special and as justified in all of its basic beliefs and practices, in all its values and taboos. The arbitrary nature of its folkways is known to its anthropologists (if it has any), but not to its overwhelming majority.

## Uncritical Persons (intellectually unskilled thinkers)

The over-whelming preponderance of people have not freely decided what to believe, but, rather, have been socially conditioned (indoctrinated) into their beliefs. They are unreflective thinkers. Their minds are products of social and personal forces they neither understand, control, nor concern themselves with. Their personal beliefs are often based in prejudices. Their thinking is largely comprised of stereotypes, caricatures, oversimplifications, sweeping generalizations, illusions, delusions, rationalizations, false dilemmas, and begged questions. Their motivations are often traceable to irrational fears and attachments, personal vanity and envy, intellectual arrogance and simple-mindedness. These constructs have become a part of their identity.

Such persons are focused on what immediately affects them. They see the

world through ethnocentric and nationalistic eyes. They stereotype people from other cultures. When their beliefs are questioned — however unjustified those beliefs may be — they feel personally attacked. When they feel threatened, they typically revert to infantile thinking and emotional counter attacks.

When *their* prejudices are questioned, they often feel offended and stereotype the questioner as “intolerant” and “prejudiced.” They rely on sweeping generalizations to support their beliefs. They resent being “corrected,” disagreed with, or criticized. They want to be re-enforced, flattered, and made to feel important. They want to be presented with a simple-minded, black-and-white, world. They have little or no understanding of nuances, fine distinctions, or subtle points.

They want to be told who is evil and who is good. They see themselves as “good.” They see their enemies as “evil.” They want all problems to admit to a simple solution and the solution to be one they are familiar with — for example, punishing those who are evil by use of force and violence. Visual images are much more powerful in their minds than abstract language. They are overly impressed by authority, power, and celebrity. They are eminently ready to be directed and controlled, as long as those doing the controlling flatter them and lead them to believe that their views are correct and insightful.

The mass media are structured to appeal to such persons. Subtle and complex issues are reduced to simplistic formulas (“Get tough on crime! Three strikes and you’re out! Adult crime, adult time! You are either for us or against us!”) Spin is everything; substance is irrelevant.

### Skilled Manipulators (weak-sense critical thinkers)

There is a much smaller group of people who are skilled in the art of manipulation and control. These people are shrewdly focused on pursuing their own interest without respect to how that pursuit affects others. Though they share many of the characteristics of uncritical thinkers, they have qualities that separate them from uncritical persons. They have greater command of the rhetoric of persuasion. They are more sophisticated, more verbal, and generally have greater status. On average, they have more schooling and achieve more success than uncritical persons. They typically acquire more power and occupy positions of authority. They are accustomed to playing the dominant role in relationships. They know how to use the established structure of power to advance their interests. Since they are fundamentally concerned, not with advancing rational values, but with getting what they want, they are careful to present themselves as sharing the values of those they manipulate.

Skilled manipulators are rarely insightful dissenters, rebels, or critics of society. The reason is simple. They cannot effectively manipulate

members of a mass audience if they appear to that mass to be invalidating their beliefs.

Manipulators do not use their intelligence for the public good. Rather they use it to get what they want in alliance with those who share their vested interests. Manipulation, domination, demagoguery, and control are their tools.<sup>1</sup>

Persons skilled in manipulation want to influence the beliefs and behavior of others. And they have insight into what makes people vulnerable to manipulation. As a result, they strive to appear before others in a way that associates themselves with power, authority, and conventional morality. This impetus is evident, for example, when politicians appear before mass audiences with well-polished, but intellectually empty, speeches.

There are a number of alternative labels for the roles that “manipulators” play, including: the spin master, the con artist, the sophist, the propagandist, the indoctrinator, the demagogue, and often, the “politician.” Their goal is always to control what others think and do by controlling the way information is presented to them. They use “rational” means only when such means can be used to create the appearance of objectivity and reasonability. The key is that they are always trying to keep some information and some points of view from being given a fair hearing.

## Fair-Minded Critical Persons

### (strong-sense critical thinkers)

Finally, there is an even smaller group of people who, though intellectually skilled, do not want to manipulate and control others. These are the people who combine critical thought, fair-mindedness, self-insight, and a genuine desire to serve the public good. They are sophisticated enough to recognize how self-serving people use their knowledge of human nature and command of rhetoric to pursue selfish ends. They are acutely aware of the phenomenon of mass society and of the machinery of mass persuasion and social control. Consequently, they are too insightful to be manipulated and too ethical to enjoy manipulating others.

They have a vision of a better, more ethical, world, which includes a realistic knowledge of how far we are from that world. They are practical in their effort to encourage movement from “what is” to “what might be.” They gain this insight by struggling with their own egocentric nature and coming to see (in deeper and deeper ways) their own involvement in irrational processes.

No one becomes a fair-minded thinker first and a selfish person later.

<sup>1</sup> A demagogue is never a true critic of society but a sophist, for he/she “tries to stir up the people by appeals to emotion, prejudice, etc. in order to win them over quickly and so gain power.” (*Webster's New World Dictionary*).

Selfish thinking is instinctive. It is an in-born state. We are all initially focused on ourselves: our own pain, desires, concerns. In the first instance, we pay attention to the needs of others only to the extent that we are forced to do so. Only through a commitment to our own intellectual and ethical development can we develop the intellectual traits characteristic of fair-mindedness. The key is that fair-minded people consistently strive to achieve the widest, most informed viewpoint. Fair-minded persons want no point of view to be suppressed. They want public discussion to include equal coverage of dissenting as well as dominant points of view. They want people to learn how to detect when someone is trying to manipulate them into believing or doing what they would not believe or do had they access to more information or further reasoning from dissenting points of view. They want everyone to see-through the "dirty tricks" of manipulative persuasion. They want to publicly disclose situations in which people of wealth and power are manipulating people with little wealth and power. They want to help people recognize how the wealthy and powerful often prey on the credulity, gullibility, and vulnerability of the poor or poorly schooled.

It should be noted that those we call the "manipulators" are often the victims of their own propaganda and devices. Caught up in their own propaganda and narrowness of vision, they sometimes fail as a result. Many businesses fail because of their inability to critique their own illusions. Nations often fail to act successfully because their leaders are caught up in their own unrealistic descriptions of the world (and of their enemies). Manipulators are not usually grand conspirators. Their one-sidedness is obvious only to those who can appreciate the difference between "self-serving" and "fair-minded" thinking. Only those capable of self-critique and self-insight can accurately assess the extent to which they are involved in the social, psychological, and intellectual manipulation of others.

## The Concept of Fallacies of Thought

The meanings of the word, "fallacy" found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* are:

1. Deception, guile, trickery, trick.
2. Deceptiveness, aptness to mislead, unreliability.
3. A deceptive or misleading argument, a sophism. In Logic esp. a flaw, material or formal, which vitiates a syllogism. Also, sophistical reasoning, sophistry.
4. A delusive notion, an error, esp. one founded on false reasoning. Also, the condition of being deceived, error.
5. Sophistical nature, unsoundness (of arguments); erroneousness, delusion. To be a human thinker is often to be a "self-deceived" thinker and hence a "fallacious" thinker. However, to think of ourselves as believing what is false (or as defending and justifying prejudices,

The word 'fallacy' derives from two Latin words, *fallax* ("deceptive") and *fallere* ("to deceive")

stereotypes, and misconceptions) is a painful thought. The human mind has developed ways to protect itself from that pain.

These ways have been labeled by psychologists as "defense mechanisms." They deny or distort reality. Their use is not deliberate and conscious, but unpremeditated and subconscious. They include repression, projection, denial, rationalization, and stereotyping.

## Naming Fallacies

The philosopher Schopenhauer, in commenting on tricks of persuasion, once remarked:

*It would be a very good thing if every trick could receive some short and obviously appropriate name, so that when a man used this or that particular trick, he could at once be reproved for it.*

Unfortunately, there are an unlimited number of maneuvers one can make in camouflaging poor reasoning, making bad thinking look good, and obscuring what is really going on in a situation. Furthermore, most people are resistant to recognizing poor reasoning when it supports what they intensely believe. It is as if people subconsciously accept the premise "all is fair in the scramble for power, wealth, and status." Any argument, any consideration, any mental maneuver or construction that validates emotionally-charged beliefs seems to the believer to be justified. The more intense the belief, the less likely that reason and evidence can dislodge it.

Most people deeply believe in — but are unaware of — the following premises:

- 1) IT'S TRUE IF I BELIEVE IT.
- 2) IT'S TRUE IF WE BELIEVE IT.
- 3) IT'S TRUE IF I WANT TO BELIEVE IT.
- 4) IT'S TRUE IF IT SERVES MY VESTED INTEREST TO BELIEVE IT.

The human mind is often myopic, inflexible, and conformist, while at the same time highly skilled in self-deception and rationalization. People are by nature highly egocentric, highly sociocentric, and wantonly self-interested. Their goal is not truth but advantage. They have not acquired their beliefs through a rational process. They are highly resistant to rational critique. Blind faith, fear, prejudice, and self-interest are primary organizers of much human thinking. Self-delusion, in conjunction with lack of self-command, characterize much human thinking. A highly compromised integrity is the result. If you point out a mistake in thinking to most persons, you may silence them momentarily. But most, like rubber bands that have momentarily been stretched and let go, will soon revert to whatever it was they believed in the first place.

It is for this reason that cultivation of intellectual virtues is so crucial to human development. Without a long-term transformation of the mind, little can be done to produce deeply honest thought. When challenged, the human mind operates from its most primitive intellectual instincts. This can be verified in the history of politics, economics, religion, and war — indeed in any history that deeply plumbs the human mind in action.

Consequently, it is important to learn to recognize the most common tricks of persuasion, that we might better understand ourselves and others. Used on others, fallacies are intellectually indefensible tricks of persuasion and manipulation; used on ourselves, they are instruments of self-deception.

In this guide we concentrate on the most common and flagrant intellectual tricks and snares. Sometimes these tricks are “counterfeits” of good thinking. For example, a false dilemma is the counterfeit of a true dilemma. We shall see this most obviously in dealing with errors of generalization and comparison.

## Mistakes Versus Fallacies

“What about mistakes?” you might ask. Isn’t it possible that some of the time we commit fallacies inadvertently, unintentionally, and innocently?

The answer is, of course, yes. Sometimes people make mistakes without any intention of tricking anyone. The test to determine whether someone is merely making a mistake in thinking is relatively simple. After the mistake is pointed out to the person, and the person is explicitly faced with the problems in the thinking, observe to see whether he or she honestly changes. In other words, once the pressure to change is removed, does the person revert to the original fallacious way of thinking, or does he demonstrate that he has truly been persuaded (and modified his thinking accordingly)? If the person reverts, or invents a new rationalization for his behavior, we can conclude that the person was using the fallacy to gain an advantage and not making a simple mistake.

## There is No Exhaustive List of Fallacies

It is not possible to create an exclusive and exhaustive list of fallacies. The intellectual tricks, traps, and snares humans so commonly engage in (or fall prey to) can be described from many differing standpoints and in a variety of differing terms. In this guide, we deal only with those most common or most easily recognized. There is nothing sacred about our list or our analysis. Here is a list of common problems in human thinking. See if you can add to this list. It is common for people (in their thinking) to:

- be unclear, muddled, or confused
- jump to conclusions
- fail to think-through implications
- lose track of their goal
- be unrealistic
- focus on the trivial
- fail to notice contradictions
- use inaccurate information in their thinking
- ask vague questions
- give vague answers
- ask loaded questions
- ask irrelevant questions
- confuse questions of different types
- answer questions they are not competent to answer
- come to conclusions based on inaccurate or irrelevant information
- use only the information that supports their view
- make inferences not justified by their experience
- distort data and represent it inaccurately
- fail to notice the inferences they make
- come to unreasonable conclusions
- fail to notice their assumptions
- make unjustified assumptions
- miss key ideas
- use irrelevant ideas
- form confused ideas
- form superficial concepts
- misuse words
- ignore relevant viewpoints
- fail to see issues from points of view other than their own
- confuse issues of different types
- lack insight into their prejudices
- think narrowly
- think imprecisely
- think illogically
- think one-sidedly
- think simplistically
- think hypocritically
- think superficially
- think ethnocentrically
- think egocentrically
- think irrationally
- be incompetent at problem solving
- make poor decisions
- lack insight into their own ignorance

Few of these flaws fall neatly under traditional fallacy labels. Nevertheless, it is useful to have some sense of what the common fallacies are and of how to distinguish them from sound reasoning.

All fallacies result from an abuse of a way of thinking that is sometimes justified. For example, generalization is one of the most important acts of human thinking. Making comparisons by analogy and metaphor is another. As we begin to focus on fallacies, we will begin with a detailed emphasis on generalizations and comparisons (and the errors of thought that emerge from their misuse). We will then focus in detail on some of the most widely used fallacies. We do not have the space to approach all fallacies in this same detailed way. In total, we focus on 44 fallacies (which we introduce as "*44 Foul Ways to Win an Argument*"). We view these fallacies as unethical strategies for winning arguments and manipulating people. They are the "dirty tricks" of intellectual life. Those who use them with success are able to do so precisely because, at some level, they deceive themselves into believing that their reasoning is sound.

## Faulty Generalizations

As humans, we live in a world of abstractions and generalizations. All words that name or characterize what we think about are products of the mental act of generalizing.<sup>2</sup> But as semanticists rightly remind us: "cow 1 is not cow 2 is not cow 3." Each and every existing thing is unique. Bishop Butler put this point in a memorable way in remarking, "Everything is itself and not another."

<sup>2</sup> For example, when we call a person a "woman" we abstract from everything that is individual and personal about her and focus on what she has in common with everyone else of her gender. A parallel point can be made about virtually every word. The point is that we cannot live a human life except with the tools of (linguistic) abstraction. They enable us to do virtually all uniquely human activities. So, being indispensable, abstractions can't be all bad in and of themselves.

The function of generalizations is quite simple. Without generalizations we could not explain anything. Things would occur around us for no reason that we could fathom. We would stand around in a stupor, unable to relate anything to anything else, for a generalization is simply a way to take some set of things (that we don't understand) and compare them with something we do understand by means of some "abstract" words.

How does critical thinking help us with the forming of generalizations and abstractions? Again, the answer is quite simple. Critical thinking enables us to take command of the abstractions we create in our own minds, the generalizations we make about the world, and therefore, ultimately, the quality of our reasoning.

So why, then, do so many people mishandle abstractions and misuse generalizations? Once again, the answer is simple. Having very little understanding of them, most people are uncomfortable with abstractions. They don't understand reasoning. The whole notion of things intellectual is really—if truth be told—pretty much of a puzzle to them. Without critical thinking skills, one doesn't know how to form reasonable and useful abstractions and generalizations. One does not know how to bring them alive in the mind or apply them with discipline in the world.

Despite the uniqueness of things, the words we use in categorizing what we experience glosses over uniqueness and concentrates on similarities or differences (in general). As such, we talk in general terms about tables, chairs, cows, crows, people, poems, and social movements. Despite the fact that there are useful things we can say about individual tables, chairs, cows, crows, people, poems, and social movements, we are nevertheless forced to "generalize" in countless ways. We talk in general terms about nearly everything that interests us: life and death, love and hate, success and failure, war and peace.

We should be careful, therefore, not to triumph in a discussion by saying "THAT IS A GENERALIZATION!" (and therefore "automatically" faulty). We must remember that generalizing is integral to the foundations of communication. It enables us to construct the concepts through which we conduct all our thinking.<sup>3</sup>

For a particular generalization to be a "fallacy," it must be based either on too few instances or unrepresentative ones. For example, if we meet three amusing Italians while on a visit to Rome, we are not justified in making the generalization that all or most Italians are amusing (there is no reason to think that the three we met were representative of all or most Italians). On the other hand, determining whether a generalization is justified is not merely a matter of counting instances. For example, if you touch a hot stove and burn your hand, one instance should be enough to convince you of the wisdom of the generalization, "Never touch a hot stove with your bare hand." On the basis of very few experiences you would be justified in making the even wider generalization, "Never touch extremely hot objects with your naked flesh."

Well, then, how can we ensure that we are making justifiable generalizations? The answer is that we need to make sure we have sufficient evidence to justify our generalizations. For example, the more diverse the group we are generalizing about, the harder it is to generalize in a justifiable way about it. Thus, it is easier to make generalizations about frogs (given the consistency in frog behavior) than it is about domesticated dogs (whose behavior varies more, from dog to dog and dog species to dog species). In a like manner, it is easier to generalize about domesticated dogs than it is about humans (whose behavior varies along many parameters). Humans behavior is highly diverse. Consider yourself as an example.

You were born into a culture (European, American, African, Asian). You were born at some point in time (in some century in some year). You were born in some place (in the country, in the city, in the North or South, East or West). You were raised by parents with particular beliefs (about the family, personal relationships, marriage, childhood, obedience, religion, politics,

<sup>3</sup> As an exercise you might re-read this paragraph noting as you go how many general ideas are in it, each with a range of generalizations behind them. You might also notice that in this section of the text, we are making generalizations about generalizations.

schooling, etc.). You came to the world with certain predispositions that influenced your development as you interacted with your environment. You formed various associations, largely based on who was around you, associations with people who had distinct viewpoints, values, and who adhered to certain taboos. Because of all of these influences, you are a complex and unique individual. One should therefore be cautious in forming generalizations about you, just as you should be cautious in forming generalizations regarding others.

This does not mean of course that there are no important generalizations we can make about humans. For example, there are features we share with all other humans. For instance, given what we know about the human mind we can make the following generalizations:

1. It is essential for our intellectual growth that we come to know the scope and limits of our intellectual capacities.
2. Most people do not recognize their tendency to think egocentrically and ethnocentrically.
3. Most people resist understanding the implications of their social conditioning and the ethnocentrism inherent in it.

One important series of studies, the Milgram Experiments,<sup>4</sup> document the human tendency to conform (uncritically) to the commands of authority figures, even when those authority figures have no power to punish or compel them to conform and even when the authority figures are asking them to do what they know to be "unethical."

Another series of studies of the "mutual images of the enemy," document a striking intellectual disability of humans. It occurs when groups come in conflict with each other for the same goal. Each side to the conflict then attributes the same virtues to itself and the same vices to the enemy. WE are "trustworthy, peace-loving, honorable, and humanitarian." THEY (our enemies) are "treacherous, warlike, and cruel."<sup>5</sup>

We can readily find examples of this phenomenon in the daily news, which is filled with positive characterizations of "our side" and caricatures of those who oppose us. Self-aggrandizing generalizations that feed the human ego are always welcome and easily "believed." Negative generalizations of those who oppose us are also welcome, as easily believed, and for similar reasons. As social animals we do not want to face our fear and distrust of members of groups we oppose. We avoid facing the fact that we are very much like the people we hate and fear. The pain, the suffering, the waste of resources that result from acting on the thinking we generate egocentrically and sociocentrically, boggles the mind.

<sup>4</sup> See studies by Stanley Milgram at [www.stanleymilgram.com](http://www.stanleymilgram.com)

<sup>5</sup> See studies by Jerome K. Frank, et al, [www.globalcommunity.org](http://www.globalcommunity.org)

## Analyzing Generalizations

If we are to aspire to reasonability, we must be willing to question our own generalizations as well as the generalizations of others. We must be willing to strip the labels off of the objects of our experience and ask ourselves (again and again), "What do we really know about this or that or that other?"

Traditionally, faulty generalizations have been labeled either "hasty" or "unrepresentative." We boil these labels down to two pieces of advice: first, begin to recognize when generalizations are being made; and second, determine whether the generalization is supported by sufficient evidence to justify it. In other words, make sure you have taken the time to accumulate enough facts to support the generalization, and make sure the evidence you have is "representative" of the full range of relevant information. Qualify your generalization whenever necessary (most, many, some, a few, rather than "all").

Remember that you are a human and speak a human language and that the language you speak is shot-through with generalizations and abstractions. Try to develop the ability to strip off whatever language you are inclined to use in "interpreting" the facts inherent in your experience (i.e., confine yourself to the statement of specific facts without putting a "spin" on those facts). See whether you can be more accurate, precise and less biased in your descriptions by reducing your interpretive generalizations to a minimum.

Consider now the following examples of generalizations commonly made by people, some of which are reasonable, others not:

**EXAMPLE:** "Yesterday I met the most remarkable person. He/she is kind, considerate, sensitive, and thoughtful."

**COMMENT:** Generalizations about the character of a person after just one day with them are rarely justifiable.

**EXAMPLE:** "Well aren't you going to stand up for our country? I thought you were a patriot."

**COMMENT:** The suppressed generalization here is : *one should never criticize one's country, because such criticism is inconsistent with loyalty.* By the way, people who unconsciously make this (political) generalization often make a similar one about love between humans: "If you really loved me you wouldn't criticize me." Both generalizations ignore the fact that reasonable critique is a necessary and healthy element of creating a better world. Many of our greatest critics have also been our greatest patriots. Tom Paine is a case in point.

**EXAMPLE:** "Why do you always have to be so critical? Can't you just be human for once?"

**COMMENT:** Besides the fact that "so critical" is overly vague, we have the suppressed (and absurd) generalization that *critique is "inhuman."* Note also the suppressed generalization that you are "always" critical. That you are sometimes critical is probable; that you are often critical is possible, but that *you are always critical* is highly unlikely.

**EXAMPLE:** "No, I'm not a rational person. I have FEELINGS!"

**COMMENT:** These statements imply that *being reasonable and having feelings are incompatible*. Not so. A reasonable person can have feelings as intense as those of an irrational person. The difference is that the emotional responses of a reasonable person make sense. They "fit" the circumstances. A reasonable person is more integrated, lives fewer contradictions, has greater insight. For a rational person, the consistency between thought, feeling, and desire lays a foundation for intensity and commitment. The generalization that being reasonable and having feelings are incompatible is based on a stereotype, not an insight.

**EXAMPLE:** "Let's face it. The answer is LOVE. That's the only way to create a better world."

**COMMENT:** If everyone loved everyone else, no doubt we would have a better world. But how is all this love to be produced in a world shot-through with greed, violence, selfishness, and cruelty, all of which result from innate egocentricity and ethnocentricity? How could we change people's thinking so as to bring about this massive outpouring of love? The notion that *LOVE is the answer* is a not very helpful generalization. It needs to be qualified in a multitude of ways.

**EXAMPLE:** "The money we are spending to save lives by preventing bioterrorism makes little sense when compared with what it would cost to save lives through other means. We spend hundreds of billions to save lives that might be at risk while we allow hundreds of people to die every day on the home front. According to the Institute of Medicine some 18,000 people die prematurely every year as a result of being uninsured. That's six 9/11s." (This example was adapted from an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 27, 2003).

**COMMENT:** If the facts asserted are correct, the reasoning in this example makes an important point. The generalization implicit here seems justifiable — that money spent to save lives should be spent where it will do the most good.

**EXAMPLE:** "There is enough food produced in the world to feed everyone. Why do I say so? Here's why: World production of grain alone is over 1.5 billion tons, enough to supply the entire world population with two pounds of grain per day. This, with the current production of vegetables, fruits, nuts, and meat, is enough to supply each man, woman, and child with 3000 calories a day — equal to the consumption of an average American."

**COMMENT:** If the facts asserted are correct, the reasoning makes an important point. The generalization, that *there is enough food produced in the world to feed everyone*, is plausible.

**EXAMPLE:** "Hunger is the result of overpopulation, if people had fewer children they would not be hungry."

**COMMENT:** In assessing this statement, let us consider some relevant facts. According to The Institute for Food and Development Policy ([www.foodfirst.org](http://www.foodfirst.org)), overpopulation is not the cause of hunger. It is usually the other way around: hunger is one of the real causes of overpopulation. The more children a poor family has, the more likely some will survive to work in the fields or in the city to add to the family's small income and later, to care for the parents in their old age. High birth rates are symptoms of the failures of a social system — inadequate family income, nutrition, education, health care and old-age security. If the facts asserted in this report are correct, the generalization is not justified.

In examining generalizations make sure you understand precisely what is being said. For example, if someone comments on the importance of loving the country, one would do well to spend some time spelling out what precisely is and is not implied by the expression. For example, what exactly is it that one is supposed to love: the land, the weather, the ideals, the mass media, hollywood movies, the criminal justice system, the medical system, puritanical attitudes, the politicians, the laws that have been passed, the wealth, the military, the foreign policy? Once one is clear about what a generalization is saying (and not saying), it is important to determine the information and evidence that would be required to justify it. Moreover, as we have said mentioned before, it is important to minimize faulty generalizations by carefully using qualifiers like "most," "some," and "a few." Remember these rules:

- Don't say *all* when you mean *most*.
- Don't say *most* when you mean *some*.
- Don't say *some* when you mean *a few*.
- And don't say *a few* when you mean just *one*.

## Post Hoc Generalizations

"Post hoc ergo propter hoc" is a Latin phrase for a well-known mistake in generalizing. It literally means "After that therefore caused by it." It refers to the mistake of inferring that something that came before something else must necessarily have caused it. Here is an obvious example of it.

"Yesterday I got a stomach ache after doing algebra. I will avoid doing algebra in the future." Here is another: "Yesterday my son was in a car crash. Right before it happened, I had a feeling something bad was going to happen. This proves that you can hurt the people you love by thinking negative thoughts about them."

The fact is that before any given event happens, other things happen, usually many, many things. That does not mean that all of these earlier events caused what came afterwards. Monday comes before Tuesday, but does not cause it. Summer comes before Fall, but does not cause it. I put on my shoes before I eat my breakfast, but putting on my shoes does not cause me to eat my breakfast.

**EXAMPLE:** The last time we had a major strike of teachers, a student died in a fight. That just shows you the irresponsibility of teachers striking.

**COMMENT:** Sorry, but no causal connection has been established. The mere fact that the strike occurred prior to the fight is no good reason to consider it a cause.

**EXAMPLE:** "Last time I had dinner at Jack's house, I had a bad stomach ache the very next day. The food at Jack's house must have been bad."

**COMMENT:** I'm afraid we must decline this "post hoc" generalization about the nature of the food at Jack's house. There are many other possible causes of the stomach ache in question. You could check and see whether the other people who ate at Jack's house also got sick.

## Analogies and Metaphors

We seek to understand new experiences and phenomena by likening them to what we already understand. When we explicitly recognize that the similarity is only *partial*, we should recognize that we are speaking analogically or metaphorically. The basic difference between an analogy and a metaphor is simple. When we put the word 'like' in our description, we create an analogy (He is LIKE a rat). When we omit the word 'like' we create a metaphor (He IS a rat.). Analogies and metaphors help us make sense of the world. We often explain something by comparing it (point by point) with something similar. Metaphors and analogies provide provisional models for understanding what we don't yet "literally" understand.

There are, in any case, three kinds of statements: literal statements, analogical statements, and metaphorical statements. There are many tree stumps in this forest (literal). A tree stump is like a chair in the forest (analogical). Every tree stump in this forest, and there are thousands, is a tribute to the power of the lumber industry and a testament to its indifference to ecology (metaphorical).

Let us now move to some examples of analogies or metaphors. Both are used to make sense of things. Let us consider how "useful" or "illuminating" each attempt is. In some cases, we will need to clarify the statement and context before evaluating it.

**EXAMPLE:** "Life is like a beautiful and winding lane, on either side bright flowers, beautiful butterflies and tempting fruits, which we scarcely pause to admire and taste, so eager are we to hasten to an opening which we imagine will be more beautiful still." G.A. Sala

**COMMENT:** What do you think? Each of us must consult our own experience to decide how useful this analogy is.

**EXAMPLE:** Life is the childhood of our immortality. — Goethe

**COMMENT:** This analogy assumes the existence of God and the soul. If you grant that assumption, then the analogy holds. If you don't, then it doesn't.

**EXAMPLE:** "Common sense does not ask an impossible chessboard, but takes the one before it and plays the game." Wendell Phillips

**COMMENT:** The point behind this metaphor is that rather than trying to make the impossible happen, we should deal with the inescapable realities of our lives. Can anyone argue with that? Perhaps not, but there may be much argument about what is actually impossible and what inescapable.

**EXAMPLE:** "The question is, are you going to stand up for your country or not?"

**COMMENT:** What does "stand up" mean? Why not "lie down" for your country or "jump up and down" for it? The speaker is no doubt asking us to act patriotically, but what does that mean? In one interpretation — "my country right or wrong" — you defend your country even when it is waging an unjust war. If you refuse to do so, you are labeled unpatriotic. In another interpretation it is your duty to support your country in a war IF IT IS JUSTIFIED and to oppose it if it is not.

**EXAMPLE:** "War is the business of barbarians." — Napoleon

**COMMENT:** It is too bad that Napoleon did not mean what he said.



**EXAMPLE:** "The blood, and only the blood, of the German people will determine our destiny." — Adolph Hitler

**COMMENT:** A typical statement by one of the world's most notorious sophists and demagogues: vague, threatening, and misleading. A probable paraphrase might be: "Germany will win in any conflict if Germans are willing to die to bring that about." Another possible interpretation might be: "Germany is the master race and racial characteristics are what determine who ultimately wins or loses."

**EXAMPLE:** "The chief evil of war is more evil. War is the concentration of all human crimes. Here is its distinguishing, accursed brand. Under its standard gather violence, malignity, rage, fraud, perfidy, rapacity, and lust. If it only slew man, it would do little. It turns man into a beast of prey." — Channing

**COMMENT:** Few people think of this metaphor when patriotic music is playing and the troops are marching off to wage war. Do you agree or disagree with the metaphor and/or the point behind our comment on it?

## 44 Foul Ways to Win an Argument

If you want to become aware of how politicians, the news media, the advertising industry, public relations experts, government officials and assorted friends and enemies use the arts of manipulation and con artistry against you — enter their point of view! Learn the art of intellectual dirty tricks so that, if necessary, you can out-think the tricksters.

First remember that those who strive to manipulate you always want something from you: your money, your vote, your support, your time, your soul — something! But they also need you to be unaware of what they are about. They always have something (often a lot) to hide. In any case, their goal is not the use of sound evidence and valid reasoning. In every case, they insult our intelligence by assuming that a manipulative trick will work on us, that we are not insightful enough to see what they are doing.

Your goal should be to recognize fallacies for what they are — **the dirty tricks of those who want to gain an advantage**. Fallacies are therefore stratagems for gaining influence, advantage, and power (over the sheep of society). You will withstand their impact more effectively when you know these fallacies inside and out. When you come to see how counterfeits of good reasoning pervade everyday life (and are the life blood of the mass media) you are better able to resist their influence. When you are inoculated against fallacies, your response to them is transformed. You ask key questions. You probe behind the masks, the fronts, the fostered images, the impressive pomp and ceremony. You take charge of your own mind and emotions. You become (increasingly) your own person.

Let us now turn to some of the most prominent fallacies used in thinking. As you read through these dirty tricks, imagine yourself instructing unscrupulous persons in the art of manipulating the sheep of the world. Imagine yourself in the "business" of seeking influence over others. You want to get their vote, support, money or what have you. Something is at stake that you care about. You face some opposition. You want to "win" the argument, gain the influence. And you don't care (at some level) what you have to do to achieve your goal. What can you do? Use any one or more of the *44 foul ways to win an argument* described in this section. If you don't mind being unscrupulous, you can manipulate and control the simple-minded. These foul ways work — even with otherwise highly sophisticated persons. You can observe the practices of politicians (and other propagandists) successfully using them everyday. And don't worry about feeling guilty. Your instinctive skill in self-deception will most likely keep you from noticing that you are doing something unethical. Here is your battery of strategies for overcoming your conscience, *44 foul ways to win an argument*.

### Dirty Trick # 1

#### Accuse Your Opponent of Doing What He is Accusing You of (or worse)<sup>6</sup>

This is sometimes called, "Pointing to another wrong." When under attack and having trouble defending themselves, manipulators turn the tables. They accuse their opponent of doing what they are being accused of. "You say that I don't love you! I think it is you who does not love me!"

Manipulators know this is a good way to put their opponents on the defensive. You may want to up the ante by accusing your opponent of doing something worse than what he is accusing you of. "How dare you accuse me of being messy? When was the last time you even took a shower?"

### Dirty Trick # 2

#### Accuse Him of Sliding Down A Slippery Slope (that leads to disaster)

The slippery slope is used when a person implies that if someone does one thing (A), it will inevitably lead to a domino effect of negative things that, in the end will result in something terrible. In other words, "A" is not so bad, but A leads to B and B leads to C and C is horrible! Imagine a mother lecturing her teenage daughter: "OK, maybe there is nothing wrong with a kiss, but remember where kissing leads and where that leads and that.

Before you know it you'll be the mother of an unwanted baby! Your young life will be ruined forever!" Manipulators who use this argument conveniently forget that many people walk carefully on slippery ground and don't fall down.

### Dirty Trick # 3

#### Appeal to Authority<sup>7</sup>

Most people are in awe of those with power, celebrity, or status. In addition, there are many sacred symbols (flags, religious images, sacred words, etc.) to which people feel intense identification and loyalty. Though power, celebrity, and status rarely correlate in any way with knowledge and insight, people are mesmerized by them.

Demagogues that successfully manipulate people know that most people are readily tricked in this way. So they wrap themselves in the flag and associate themselves with power, celebrity, or status (in any way they can). This includes looking for scientists and other "knowledgeable" persons to "support" their views.

Cigarette companies once hired scientists who were (in effect) prepared to say that there was no PROOF that cigarettes caused lung cancer — though they knew (or should have known) that the proof was there. Cigarette

<sup>6</sup> Traditionally called "Tu Quoque" – literally, "you also"

<sup>7</sup> Traditionally called "Argumentum ad Verecundiam"

companies also founded "The American Tobacco Institute," a body of researchers supposedly seeking to discover the effects of smoking on health. In reality, the researchers were seeking to defend the interests of the tobacco industry under the guise of scientific authority. They deceived millions of people (and caused millions of deaths along the way). Naturally, they could only do this by deceiving themselves into thinking that they were simply being *scientifically careful*. And, of course, they made a lot of money in the process (which strongly influenced their ability to deceive themselves).

### Dirty Trick # 4

#### Appeal to Experience

Skilled manipulators, con artists, and politicians often imply that they have "experience" to back them up, even when their experiences are limited, or non-existent. They know it is much harder for someone to deny what they say if they speak with the voice of experience. Of course, they will sometimes come up against an opponent who has more experience than they do. In that case, they attack their opponent's experience — as not representative, as biased, as limited, as distorted, or as subjective.

### Dirty Trick # 5

#### Appeal to Fear

Deep down, most people have a lot of fears - fear of death, disease, loss of love, loss of attractiveness, loss of youth, loss of income, loss of security, rejection by others. The unprincipled manipulators know that people tend to react primitively when any of these fears are activated. Thus they represent themselves as having the ability to protect people against these threats (even when they can't). Distrust authorities who say that certain groups (or people) are inherently dangerous. "Remember, these people are threatening our freedom, our way of life, our homes, our property." Politicians often use this strategy quite effectively to make sure people line up behind governmental authority and do what the government — that is, what politicians — want.

### Dirty Trick # 6

#### Appeal to Pity (or sympathy)

Manipulators know how to portray themselves (and their situation) in such a way as to make people feel sorry for them or at least gain their sympathy, especially when they don't want to take responsibility for something they have done.

Consider the student who, when confronted with the fact that she hasn't done her homework, whines, and says something like, "You don't understand how hard my life is. I have so much to do. It's very hard for me

## 44 Foul Ways to Win an Argument

Accuse Your Opponent of Doing What He is Accusing You of (or worse)	Hedge What You Say
Accuse Him of Sliding Down A Slippery Slope (that leads to disaster)	Ignore the Evidence
Appeal to Authority	Ignore the Main Point
Appeal to Experience	Attack Evidence (That Undermines Your Case)
Appeal to Fear	Insist Loudly on a Minor Point
Appeal to Pity (or sympathy)	Use the Hard-Cruel-World Argument (to justify doing what is usually considered unethical)
Appeal to Popular Passions	Make (Sweeping) Glittering Generalizations
Appeal to Tradition or Faith ("the tried and true")	Make Much of Any Inconsistencies in Your Opponent's Position
Assume a Posture of Righteousness	Make Your Opponent Look Ridiculous ("Lost in the Laugh")
Attack the person (and not the argument)	Oversimplify the Issue
Beg the Question	Raise Nothing But Objections
Call For Perfection (Demand impossible conditions)	Rewrite History (Have It Your Way)
Create a False Dilemma (the Great Either/Or)	Seek Your Vested Interests
Devise Analogies (and Metaphors) That Support Your View (even if they are misleading or "false")	Shift the Ground
Question Your Opponent's Conclusions	Shift the Burden of Proof
Create Misgivings: Where There's Smoke, There's Fire	Spin, Spin, Spin
Create A Straw Man	Talk in Vague Generalities
Deny or Defend Your Inconsistencies	Talk Double Talk
Demonize His Side Sanitize Yours	Tell Big Lies
Evade Questions, Gracefully	Treat Abstract Words and Symbols As If They Were Real Things
Flatter Your Audience	Throw In A Red Herring (or two)
	Throw In Some Statistics
	Use Double Standards (whenever you can)

## Fallacy Detection: Analyzing a Speech from the Past

Now test yourself on the fallacies you have just read. Read through the following excerpts (from a historically important political speech, a speech whose persuasive power won a national election in 1897). See how many of the *44 foul ways to win an argument* this writer used.

Before reading the speech, consider the following description by James Truslow Adams<sup>16</sup>, American historian, of the national mood at the time:

...powerful business interests were chafing because we did not annex Hawaii. Senator Lodge had his eye on Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Assistant Secretary of the Navy Roosevelt was anxious for something to do with his ships...Mr Pulitzer, owner of The World, remarked "that he rather liked the idea of a war — not a big one — but one that would arouse interest and give him a chance to gauge the reflex in circulation figures."...a group of powerful business men and politicians bent on imperial expansion; a group of newspapers callously searching for sensational news which could be translated into circulation; and a shiny new gun in our hands of which we were proud (pp. 81-82).

Now imagine yourself a voter in the U.S. in 1898 listening to the following excerpts from a speech, *The March of the Flag*, given by Albert J. Beveridge (who would soon become U.S. Senator). Using the chart in the right

<sup>16</sup> Adams, J. 1932. *History of the United States*, vol. 4

## 44 Foul Ways to Win an Argument

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Appeal to Experience
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